

The Transistor Radio and its Effect on Illinois Teenagers

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Few baby boomers made it through their teenage years without experiencing the impact of the transistor radio. Despite this, the transistor radio had a fairly rocky beginning. When the first was introduced to the market in 1954, it was met with lackluster public interest and sales figures. However, these first few months turned out to be an anomaly. The transistor radio went on to become a popular sales item, the catalyst for the biggest music revolution in history and a symbol of teenage independence across the country.

In order to make a reasonable argument on the effect transistor radios had on Illinois teenagers, it is important to first understand the history of the device. The first model to come on the market cost about \$50 (\$280 at today's rates). This was the shirt-pocket size REGENCY TR-I. It did not sell well, but many other companies soon added their models. The other models were all larger than the TR-I, and often more expensive (up to \$80, about \$450 currently). Having no advantages over the TR-I, the new models did not sell any better. It seemed the transistor radio would become merely an interesting gadget, not a must-have item for all adolescents. The industry needed an infusion of fresh blood. It came from Japan, where a number of companies had obtained the technology for building transistor radios. After several failed attempts, the first pocket-sized Japanese transistor radio rolled out in March 1957 from the company that

went on to become SONY. This model was considerably smaller than the American models, mainly because of one innovation: not only had they replaced the Vacuum Tube with the smaller transistor, the rest of the radio was also made of special miniature parts. Many Americans fell in love with the TR-63's aesthetics and technological power. When the even smaller TR- 610 was released, the transistor radio was on the verge of becoming a craze. However, it would take another factor to push it over the brink: the rock and roll revolution.

In 1954, Elvis Presley burst onto the music scene with a number one single, "That's All Right." Within a year he had a \$40,000 contract, and went on to be the biggest record seller of all time. He gave America its first taste of Rock and Roll, and America would not let go. By 1960, Rock was dominating the airwaves, but many adults did not like it. The tension between teenagers and parents found an outlet in the transistor radio. Teens could listen to what they wanted wherever they wanted. They eagerly snatched up the radios, and the transistor radio became an expression of oneself, much as teenagers today use cell phones as a form of self-expression. The individuality and small size of transistor radios also contributed to the incredible market for them; instead of each family needing one cabinet-sized radio, each member in the family needed his or her own transistor radio. Hence, this new technology found its way into the hands of nearly all teenagers.

Anything, material or not, when possessed by nearly all of a particular population, will have an effect on that population. Whether the effect of transistor radios on teenagers

was positive or negative is subject to debate. Proponents argue that the transistor radio made a teen more independent, and thus, happier. Many teens of the era cite Rock and Roll's liberating energy as a reason for its popularity. Transistor radios also made the parents happier, since they no longer had to listen to their kids' preferences. However, opponents made a strong argument that is still a hot issue today. Essentially, they argued that another result of teens taking their music with them was that their parents were no longer around to hear what they were listening to. Songwriters took this opportunity to appeal to the adolescent mind with many raunchy songs, at least compared to the traditional listening of only ten years earlier. One critic of the time said of Rock that "not only are most of the [rock and roll] songs junk, but in many cases they are obscene junk pretty much on the level with dirty comic magazines." The presiding argument was that Rock songs put bad ideas in kids' heads. Loudly.

With new decades come new technologies. After the transistor radio, there was the cassette walkman, the CD walkman, the MP3 player. And now, with music available, legally and illegally, to everyone with an internet connection, music is influencing a broader and broader base. Modern politicians still argue over the appropriateness of the content of popular music. But the teenagers that people were concerned with in the Sixties turned out all right, even though, many would argue, their minds were contaminated by the foul music coming out of their transistor radios. Obviously, the adults and teens of the past, and possibly of today, were and are on different channels.

[From CEA. org. "Digital America: The Transistor." www.ce.org/publications/books_references/digital_american/history/the_transistor.asp (Oct. 21, 2004); "Elvis Presley," Campusprogram.com. www.campusprogram.com/reference/en/wikipedia/e/el/evis-presley.html (Oct. 21, 2004); "Rock & Roll is Here to Stay", BMI. www/bmi.com/library/brochures/historybook/rock.asp. (Oct. 20, 2004); Enrico Tedeschi, "Transistor Radio Mini-History," www.etedeschi.ndirect.co.uk/tr.radio.history.htm (Oct. 20, 2004).]